

FRANK GILLETTE



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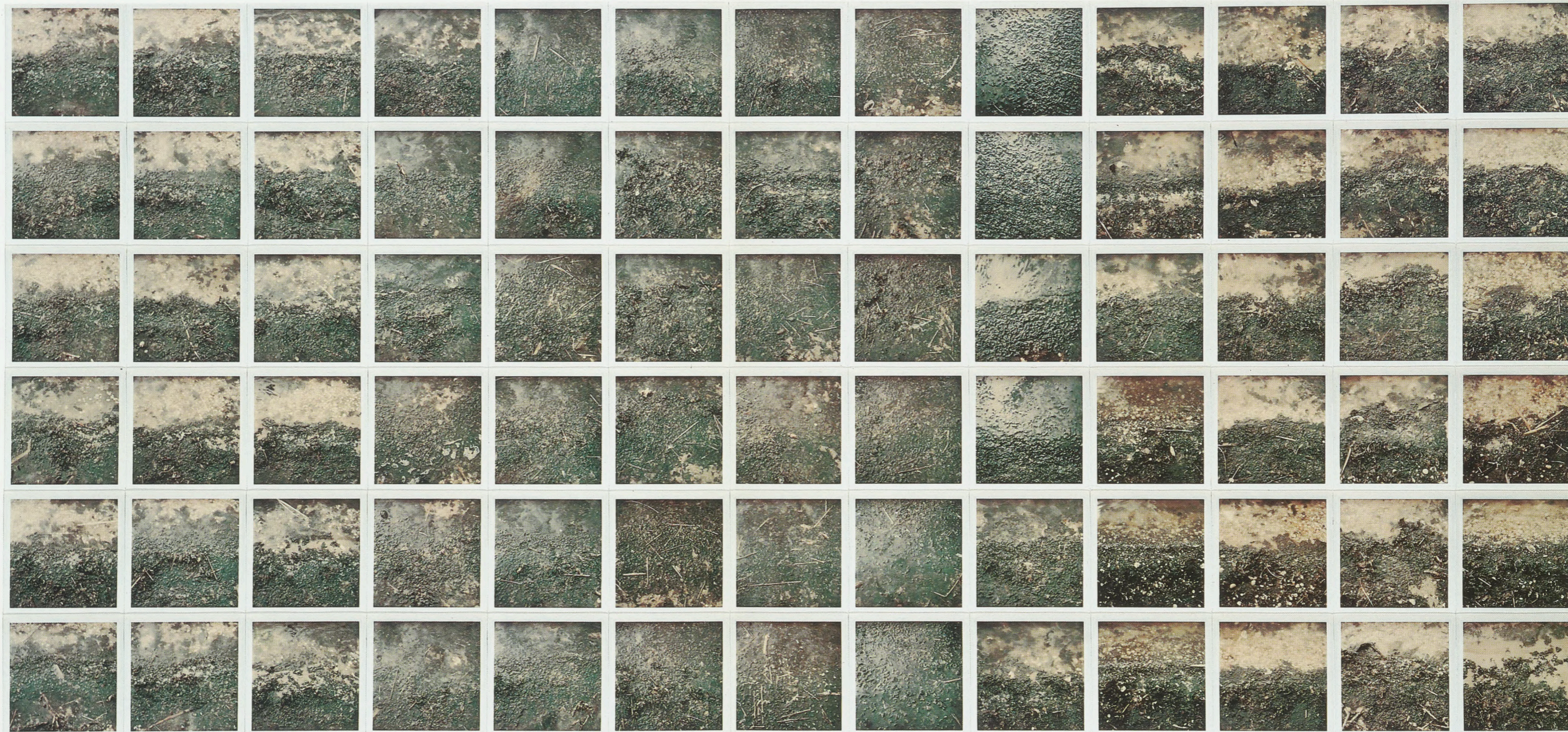
September 19–November 23, 1980

The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

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The possibilities of Polaroid photography in the hands of artists have been quickly grasped and quite exhaustively explored. Many photographers whose command of the photographic medium relies on traditional shooting and developing techniques have used SX-70 to great advantage, sometimes as a kind of toy, occasionally with real seriousness and authority. But few artists—photographers or painters or whatever—have so independently and single-mindedly pursued one of the SX-70's many uses, that of quick serial outdoor recorder, as has Frank Gillette. Beginning as early as 1971, Gillette has used the Polaroid camera as an adjunct to his other primary medium, the video camera. He has proceeded to ignore the commands of "pure photography"; he has even bypassed the "material manipulation" (*à la* Les Krims), and invented a powerfully original mode of expression with the SX-70 medium as a kind of encapsulator of nature in tiny increments, or to put it somewhat differently, as a facilitator for his long project of creating an aesthetic grounded primarily in taxonomy.

Gillette literally allows pattern in nature to dictate the patterns of his art. But he sometimes goes beyond observation to achieve syntheses, and of course it is in his synthetic abilities that one truly defines him as an artist rather than "researcher." As does the researcher, Gillette first selects a site, or a geographic problem, and then observes it, systematically and patiently; he then undergoes another process of selection on the basis of schematized sequential patterns, and at an even later stage, in the studio, he makes his final selections in deciding how to order the numbered images. He has devised several methods of ordering, from the most strictly schematized to a relatively fluid and "arbitrary" approach. The latter is exemplified in what the artist refers to as the "random walk" pieces, in which the units are ordered not according to the order in which they were shot on location, but upon an order determined in the studio and based on the artist's sense of how they relate visually to

each other on the grid. It is not as though Gillette shuffles the deck—but the "random walk" pieces are ordered by virtue of *sensibility* rather than observational logic.

We are perhaps baffled by the simultaneous lack of logic, and the sense of underlying unity, of the "random walk" pieces. But some of them are extraordinarily successful if only in a kind of tonal lyricism and overall relational complexity. On the other hand, in the carefully "strategized" works such as *Mecox Tideline*, we are immediately aware that some sort of genuinely chronological occurrence is in evidence, though we cannot necessarily reconstitute its structural method on the basis of visual clues alone. Here is what occurred in the creation of *Mecox Tideline*: the artist walked along a two-hundred yard strip of tidal sand on Long Island's Mecox Bay, stopping to photograph straight down with each forward step; the resulting images were numbered, and then mounted on the 6 by 13 grid in a linear progression starting at upper left and proceeding downward to the bottom of the six-image row, then moving up from bottom to top in the next row, then down and up and so on. We thus travel through a particular geographic sequence, and we trace the changes in light and its variations of opacity and tonality with the progression in time. The odd milkiness accumulating in the central region of the progression is generated by the sun's angle in relation to the subject.

The selection of the observant mind combines with the tool—Polaroid SX-70—to create a microcosmic evocation of the natural world. But as Gillette acknowledges, the tool even when used relatively artlessly, doesn't really evoke systems in nature directly so much as it provides a kind of metanomic image of certain natural processes. We are not, for example, shown or reminded of "naturalistic" perspective. Photography in general tends to operate in an area that shifts continually between illusory deep space and literal flatness. Small-scale Polaroid photos in particular tend to emphasize their own objectness, and therefore often their flatness. Gillette would

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seem to reinforce this quality of SX-70 by arranging his images in grids. But in fact he often *engages* the factor of illusionistic recessive space, by contrasting various kinds of light and shade and tonality and density and all sorts of other "qualities" of pictorially frozen details of the world. The fragments of landscape—sky or earth or object-on-ground—work contrapuntally and harmonically among themselves, establishing a kind of serial/statistical logic, tempered by the control gained through artistic license. The evoked ambivalence of illusory space in nature, through observation in fragments and reconstitution in a combined spirit of taxonomic order and aesthetic freedom—this oddly confusing and yet legible quality is distinctive to Gillette's work, both still photographs and video.

Gillette has firmly disavowed any interest in conceptual art or narrative concerns, in video or photography. He says he is as involved as the scientist is with empirical observation, but in the service not of objective truth but of a cultivation of *sensibility*. So we establish the artist in a realm which is not truly allied with recent post-minimalism, nor with the photographic camp. Gillette's notion of *sense* instead of either "information" or "aesthetics" is crucial to the aim and result of these apparently rigorous and even classical works. The contradictions inherent in the use of a simple and universally available commercial medium, a medium literally devoid of any aesthetic history when Gillette began to experiment with it in 1971, is not lost on the artist. He has said, "I am reacting against the aestheticization of art. . . . My reaction is simply to re-embrace the world, to go right back to source and

concretize. . . . What I actively resist is what I think of as effete abstractionism, or anti-empirical art. I work in the medium of the realist."

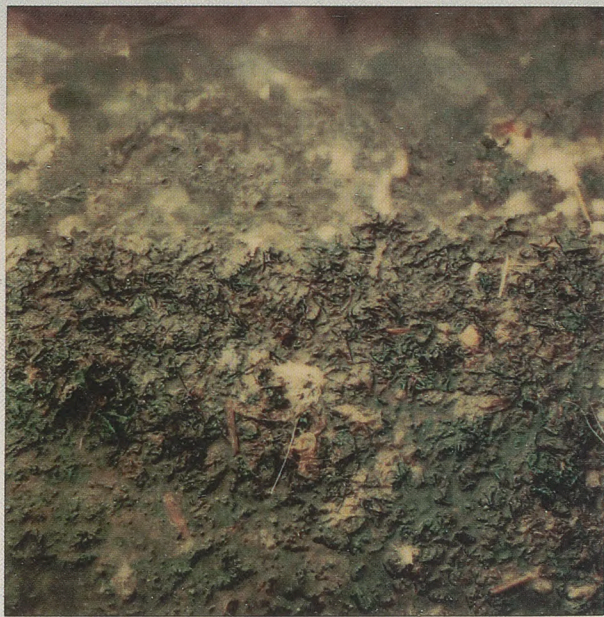
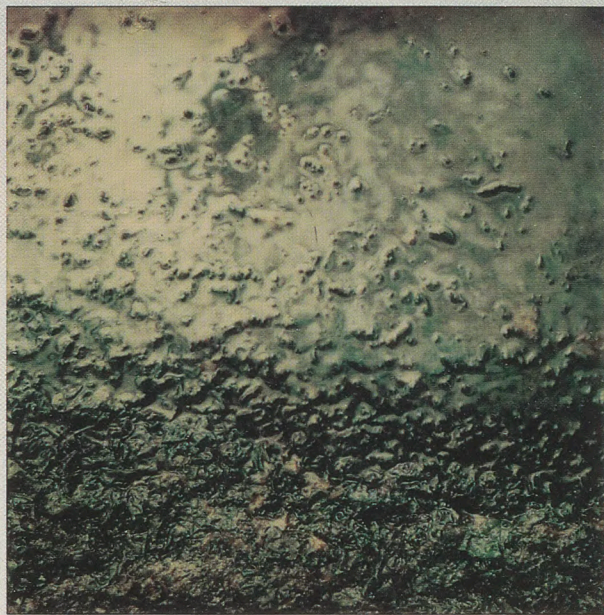
Of course all photography has an element of the concrete, in that it seems by definition reliant on the immediately perceived external world. But Gillette does in fact proceed in a manner which acknowledges the unedited natural world to a much greater degree than most art photography. For we are shown sites in subtly varying conditions across time. It is not just the directness, the unprocessed or rather the non-darkroom-mediated character of the Polaroid medium, but another fact which makes Gillette's photographs so strikingly concrete, and so dramatically different from most other art photography: Gillette works cerebrally, literally deductively, and in a spirit of intellection and frankness both, which impart to his work a powerfully demanding aura of the strictly observational. He gives us precious little "artistic editorializing," and even less narrative content. It is the literalness of Gillette's art which makes it function so concretely, but this directness and empiricism is tempered by an underlying intellectual complexity and, even more important, by an inveterate temperamental romanticism. Gillette is a self-proclaimed "primitive . . . involved with deep traditions," and makes no secret of the fact that for all his rigorous observational techniques, he finally works intuitively, and with a tendency to adjust his pre-conceived methodology according to whim or taste, as he goes along.

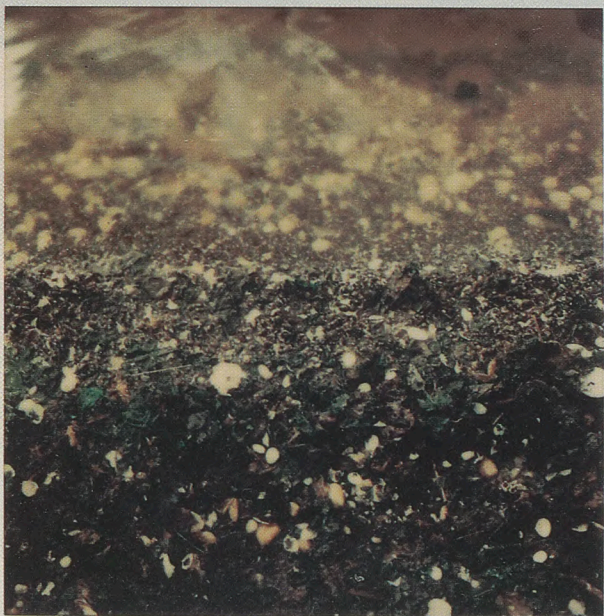
Jane Livingston

Catalogue of the Exhibition

All works are composed of Polaroid SX-70 prints. Overall dimensions are in inches, height preceding width. Unless otherwise stated the works are in the collection of the artist.

1. *Sky Over Eze*, Cote d'Azur, France 1974
49 x 51
Lent by Virginia Dwan, New York City
 2. *Field Near Siena*, Italy 1974
37 x 38
 3. *Kelp Line*, Malibu Beach, California 1975
30½ x 45
Lent by Awilda and Michael Bennett,
New York City
 4. *Black Coral Beach*, Bermuda 1975
40 x 44
 5. *Cliff Face*, Big Sur, California 1975
40 x 42
 6. *Stone Beach*, Big Sur, California, 1975
33¼ x 45¾
Lent by Cynthia Gillette, New York City
 7. *Untitled* 1975
36½ x 35
Lent by James and Ann Harithas, New York
City and Houston, Texas
 8. *Upper Black Eddy Field*, Bucks County,
Pennsylvania 1975
36½ x 35
 9. *Cave Wall in Rain #1*, Delaware River
Basin, Pennsylvania 1975
32½ x 32
 10. *Cedar Grove in Rain*, Monterey Peninsula,
California 1975
36½ x 35
Lent by James and Ann Harithas,
New York City and Houston, Texas
 11. *Mecox Diptych*, Mecox Bay, Southampton,
New York 1976
40 x 60
 12. *Mecox Diptych*, Mecox Bay, Southampton,
New York 1976
40 x 60
 13. *White Coral Beach*, Maui 1976
30 x 46
 14. *Mecox Tideline*, Mecox Bay, Southampton,
New York 1976
29½ x 52½
 15. *Maui Palms*, Maui 1976
41½ x 38½
 16. *Napili*, Maui 1976
40 x 60
 17. *Cave Wall in Rain #2*, Hana, Maui 1976
32½ x 32
 18. *Makenna Lava Field*, Maui 1976
19 x 53
Lent by James and Phyllis Juszczyk,
New York City
 19. *Shaman's Walk*, Mecox Bay, Southampton,
New York 1976
21 x 22
 20. *Rio Grande River Bed*, Chihuahua Desert,
Mexico 1977
40 x 38
 21. *Rio Grande Field*, Chihuahua Desert,
Mexico 1977
21¾ x 56½
 22. *Calla Lilies*, Houston, Texas 1978
33¾ x 45½
 23. *Single Chord Palm*, Key Allegro, Texas
1978
41½ x 38½
 24. *Shadow Progression*, Key Allegro, Texas
1978
28 x 49
Lent by Cynthia Gillette, New York City
 25. *Tide Line #3*, Aransas, Texas 1978
31½ x 30
 26. *Torque*, Aransas, Texas 1978
18¾ x 29¾
Lent by Cynthia Gillette, New York City
 27. *Tide Line #1*, Aransas, Texas 1978
22 x 39
 28. *Two Views #2* (Portuguese Man O'War),
Key Allegro, Texas 1978
18¾ x 29¾
- ARANSAS: AXIS OF OBSERVATION 1978
1. *Aransas: Recapitulation*
39 x 51½
 2. *Blues Feeding (Padre Island)*
31½ x 32
 3. *Aransas: Bog Circumference*
28½ x 27½
 4. *Aransas: Tideline*
39 x 51½
 5. *Aransas: Field Cover*
39½ x 51½
 6. *Padre Dunes: Summer Solstice*
31½ x 44½
 7. *Ebb Tide: St. Joseph's Island*
39½ x 38½
 8. *Aransas Bay: Tidal Pools*
41 x 38½
 9. *Aransas: Oak Grove*
51¼ x 39¾
 10. *Aransas: Double Axis*
36½ x 41½
Lent by James and Ann Harithas, New
York City and Houston, Texas





Detail, *Mecox Tideline*, Mecox Bay, Southampton, New York, 1976, reproduced actual size.

from NOTES ON THE PHOTOGRAPHIC SETS

Logicians speak of an unavoidable division of all entities into *particulars* and *universals*. Particulars multiply and enter into complexes, or sets, as expressions of specificity; they exist in the world in which we experience and therefore they exist in time. Universals occur as the relations in complexes or sets. They do not exist in time and have no relation to one specific place which they may not simultaneously have to another.

This way of thinking about the stuff of the world is not exclusive to logicians. Constable said that his art could be found under every hedge. His chiaroscuro of nature was everywhere, universally represented in the infinite variation of specific particulars. Atget's photographs of trees is another case. The particular tree is in every instance primordial in its universality while unique and specific in its setting. Their recurrent characteristics develop an intensity of resemblance such that each is each and each is the other. Bellini's portrait/landscape, *St. Francis in the Wilderness*, is another kind of paradoxical embrace of the universal/particular oscillation. Each of its botanical specimens is rendered with encyclopedic detail while St. Francis exists outside the bounds of naturalism. This somehow quickens the "enigma of visibility" itself.

Employing this logical distinction between universal and particular in the making of photographic sets reconciles what is at once appearance and reality, partial and whole. The ratio of specificity to variety is grounded in an imperceptual switch from figure to ground. Each photograph considered individually depicts a distinct nominal distance. If you focus on a single photograph (the minimal unit of observation) its *specific distance* displaces the *formal space* of the set. If you reverse your focal attention all specific distance disappears. Distance is associated with the particular, space with universality.

There is a simple mimetic value in the covert, paradoxical procedures for choosing one remote or fluctuant patch of earth (for whatever *a priori*, systemic reasons) over another. Any observational regimen is essentially a private method

whereby things and views of things are differentiated; where a hierarchy of fact intersects with the observer's hierarchy of perception.

For example: Detritus deposited by random forces in nature, say wind or rains, unfolds *in seriatim* into a metaphor of circulation. A formal pattern based upon hunches regarding proximity, sequence and confluence is mapped, or superimposed, over the natural pattern. The central idea in an observational schema is that all such strategies are improbable; none are natural. "Nature is full of an infinity of operations which have never been part of experience," wrote Leonardo.

Since the mapping is multiple, the observational schema is allusive rather than denominative. The single photograph is an increment revealing some fraction of the system while being an iconic sign resting upon its faithful similarity with what it represents. Schemata composed of iconic signs lend themselves to, and are best suited for, codification on the basis of manifest or structural similarities. Logically more complex schemata, for example those using formal or abstract signs, permit the classification of objects and phenomena on the basis of hidden or functional similarities. All of the observational strategies are both iconic and formal in this sense, as they are the succession of terms in a series.

A visual calculus for charting serial observation originates in the work of Muybridge and E. J. Marley. Their explicit goal was to visualize movement as it evolves in space and is linked with a strict directional seriality. It is involved less with the domain of visual gratification than it is with exemplification of principle.

The chain or sequence of *sign-situations* in a photographic set do not *necessarily* represent a strict directional seriality. It is but one option in a repertoire, since each set is an exercise in nominalist individuality, is internally determined, and traces an ineluctable working-out of a given way of looking within a given method of organization. The key is to "distinguish without dividing"; to engage the complex attribute Coleridge called "multeity in unity."

Frank Gillette

Frank Gillette was born in 1941 in Jersey City, New Jersey and lives in New York City. He attended Pratt Institute from 1959–1963. From a painting background he turned to the video medium in 1968. Gillette is presently a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow, as he was in 1976–77, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellow (1978–79), and has exhibited widely throughout the United States and Europe. Most recently he has had one-man shows at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, Texas and at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, California. His book *Between Paradigms* was published in 1973. Work by the artist can be seen at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York City.





This exhibition is one of a series of individual photography exhibitions supported by Polaroid Corporation and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a Federal agency. The series is jointly organized by Associate Director and Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin.

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SEVENTEENTH STREET &
NEW YORK AVENUE, NORTH-WEST
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